DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 124 970 CS 202 800

AUTHOR Stock, Ely
TITLE Writing a Poem: A Lesson in Using Metaphor and Concrete Language.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeast Regional Conference on English in the Two Year College (10th, Selden, Long Island, October 23-25, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Creative Writing; Language; *Metaphors; *Poetry; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Concrete Language

ABSTRACT

"Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes can be used as a stimulus for encouraging students to use concrete language and metaphor in writing a poem. Students are asked to imitate the shape and form of the poem and then talk about how it feels to be a poet, find images from other poems they like, imitate other poems, and discuss the difference between poetry and prose. Students are then encouraged to write a concrete paragraph about a specific nonconcrete word such as "beauty" or "truth." (TS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Ely Stock

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

ED124970

Ely Stock
Staten Island Community College
The City University of New York

Writing a Poem: A Lesson in Using Metaphor and Concrete Language

The poem on the attached sheet can be used as a stimulus for a writing exercise in which everyone in the class winds up using concrete language and metaphor and, incidentally, writes a poem. The goal is to imitate the "shape" of Hughses poem; that is, for each person to end up with his own poem of about twenty lines of irregular length based on an extended metaphor.

The preparation for the actual writing is important for inexperienced readers of poetry who need to learn to focus on the actual words. Often I ask people to read the poem aloud in different ways which might include whispering it, reading it gruffly, reading it in falsetto, reading it to just one other person in the class.

After we've spent fifteen minutes or so reading the poem I ask each student to write down one concrete word or phrase which is his own metaphoric equivalent for "life." If it hasn't already been articulated, I usually say at this point that Hughes compares life to a "crystal stair," that others have compared it to a "bowl of cherries." "Come up with your own comparative term for what life is or isn't."

I go around the room and write each "life-word" on the board. Often some students will choose words like "great," "terrible," or "beautiful" but I accept only concrete words (including "concrete" itself) which can furnish the basis for

CS202 800

an extended metaphor. Typical choices, finally, might include: road, airplane, storm, wavy ocean, and several idiosyncratic choices like "cockroach," "toilet-bowl," or "frog" (we all croak in the end).

We talk about the words or phrases the students have chosen and I ask each person to choose one of the words on the board as his basis and write a poem just like Hugheses. I ask them to start the poem with the line "Well, son, I'll tell you:" and end it with "And life for me ain't been (or 'has been')...." I ask them to use language throughout which fits the basic image.

While they write I walk around the room and look at what they're doing. Usually this means reminding several people to stick to the "shape" of Hugheses poem and not to write rhymed couplets.

After everyone has finished (and, without exception, all of the open-admissions students in my classes have always finished an acceptable poem), we read them to each other.

This exercise has always worked,no matter the level of ability of the student. The highly skilled find it challenging; the relatively unskilled find it not only challenging but also possible.

Follow up

We talk about how it feels to be a poet.

We talk about whether or not it was a good idea to imitate the poem by shaping our own thoughts into sentences and phrases of certain lengths.

I might ask them to find images from other poems they like and bring them in.

I might ask them to imitate another poem by writing a poem of their own shaped like it. Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is a good choice because its shape is less restrictive than Hughses.

Once all of this led to a discussion of various poetic forms. Often I find this exercise a useful reference point when discussing the student's other writing with him. I sometimes ask people to run a single image through papers they are revising as they did when they wrote "the poem."

After we discuss the difference between poetry and prose, I might ask each person to give me one general word like "beauty" or "truth" and ask everyone to choose one and write a concrete paragraph about that general word.

The reaction of the classes I've tried this with has been overwhelmingly positive. And everyone has always written a poem of which he could be proud. Always. Everyone.

Mother to Son
by
Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor--
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it kinder hard.
Don't you fall now --
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Copyright 1926 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
and renewed 1954 by Langston Hughes.
Reprinted from Selected Poems by
Langston Hughes.